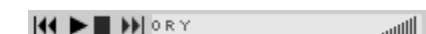




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Summit enlists help for San Bernardino County's homeless



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By DOUGLAS QUAN
The Press-Enterprise

The bottle ensured Paul Hiestand stayed homeless on and off for years. But getting off the streets permanently required more than dropping the booze.

A Rialto clinic gave the 61-year-old man medication to treat depression and enrolled him in rehab.

A case manager at a San Bernardino community center got him into a shelter. An employment center in the same city found him two part-time custodial jobs.

And a homeless-court judge cleared his DUI record.

The communitywide effort central to Hiestand's turnaround was a key theme of a homeless summit held Monday by the San Bernardino County Homeless Partnership.

The county Board of Supervisors formed the partnership in September in response to a 39 percent increase in the county's homeless population during the past five years. The number of homeless people, which was 5,270 in 2002, reached 7,331 this year.

Led by Patricia Nickols of the Community Action Partnership of San Bernardino County and Isaac Jackson of the county's Department of Behavioral Health, the partnership hopes to draft within a year a comprehensive 10-year plan to end homelessness. They're asking public and private agencies, faith-based groups and businesses to help.

More than 300 cities and counties nationwide have developed or are developing 10-year plans. Those with plans are more likely to get federal funding.

Riverside County, whose homeless population dropped to 4,508 this year from 4,785 in 2005, unveiled its 10-year plan last month. The plan calls for more shelter beds, temporary housing and low-income housing. It also recommends expanding street outreach teams and creating one-stop service centers to assist homeless people in obtaining jobs, housing and health care.

Some of those goals were echoed at Monday's summit, attended by more than 125 government workers, service providers and educators.

Representatives of PATH Partners, a Los Angeles nonprofit that provides an array of homeless services, said an integrated approach to homeless services is needed.

Rental assistance isn't enough, said Maggie Willis, a PATH managing partner. Providers should see whether the person being helped also needs money-management advice or job assistance, she said.

While providers should strive to get homeless people into permanent housing, that doesn't happen overnight, which is why shelters are still needed, Willis said. The Community Action Partnership has said there is a 6,000-bed shortfall in shelters in San Bernardino County.

Willis also said providers need to build relations with landlords to offer low-income housing. Some landlords are reluctant at first to offer units, fearing that unruly tenants will move in, but those perceptions are usually shattered after landlords meet the PATH staff and prospective tenants, she said. If landlords have a problem with a tenant, they can always call the PATH staff for help.

Allowing the homeless problem to fester is "economically irresponsible" because of the public dollars spent supporting homeless people who go through emergency rooms, hospitals and jails, said Ed Cabrera, regional coordinator of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, which helps communities with their homeless plans.

County Supervisor Josie Gonzales said leaders should not be afraid to shelve ideas that don't work and to look to other communities for ideas that do work.

Rolling a cigarette outside Rialto's Behavioral Health Resource Center, where the summit was held, Hiestand said he would be dead if not for the service providers who helped him. He said he has been sober for 16 months and happily pays \$550 a month to stay at the shelter.

"It's an indication of being part of the human race, not just a derelict. It's a mark of responsibility," he said.

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